



MONTEREY NEWS

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Watching the Sunnies

Fish are bony vertebrates like us, and they are “cold-blooded.” This does not mean they are without feeling. In scientific lingo the word is *poikilothermic*, which is Greek for variegated heat. They do not have to keep themselves at some constant temperature but are adapted to survive and thrive at the changeable temperature of their habitat, which for fish is in the water.

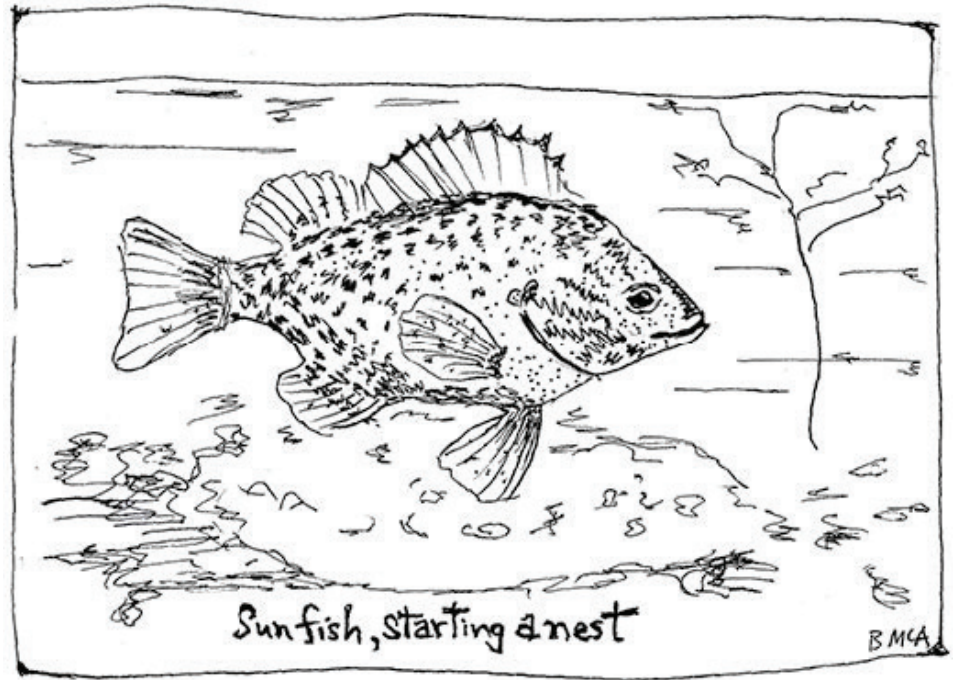
Lake Garfield, for instance, can be very chilly in the winter. Eventually it warms up and even us endotherms (warm-blooded creatures) can enjoy getting in all over, though not all day and all night, at least not in Lake Garfield, which would not keep us at 98.6° F. After awhile we would become hypothermic and shut down.

The bony fish, or teleosts, are many. They are the dominant group of fish in the world, which just means they are the most numerous. In the oceans they are in the vast majority, and in fresh water they are almost the entire population. Not only are they a perfect physical design, they also are wonderfully fecund. One female cod, out in the ocean, lays nine million eggs.

Here in the fresh waters of Lake Garfield, my favorite bony fish has always been the sunfish. As a kid under the age of sixteen, I did not need a fishing license. I tied my wooden rowboat to an old stump in what had once been Dad Keyes’ cow pasture, and put an ill-fated worm onto the hook, threading that barbed metal killer into the living creature. What a merciless kid I was. I would never do that today.

Over the gunnel it went and pretty soon here came a sunfish, out from among those long-dead but un-decayed stump roots. Today, sixty years on, those roots are still perfect fish habitat.

We called them sunfish, which is a large group, taxonomically, and includes some marine fish, too. I caught a lot here, scaled and cleaned them, and we cooked them over a fire in our tipi in the wilds of the swampy end of the lake. There never was a better tasting fish. I was a hunter in those days and will never forget the thrill of the tug on the line. One time I was



reeling in the sunny and ... wham! A pickerel dashed out from the stump roots somewhere and nailed my fish. I was left with only the front half, but Dad, who was on board that time and was as much a hunter as I, grabbed what was left, snicked off the bright pectoral fins, and put them on the hook. Over the gunnel again, and here came the pickerel for more. This time it seemed like we had him, but it was light-weight line with no leader, and those pickerel have teeth. After a most exciting few seconds with my rod way more bent than I’d ever handled, it was all over. Slack line, no more fight, and a lake predator off somewhere with a hook in him.

I don’t fish any more, and it’s not because I am too cheap to get a license. Is it because I might have to torture some hapless earthworm? Maybe it is.

I still watch for sunnies in the shallows, and perch, bluegills, and long lean pickerels, too. Now I just like to see what they are up to. Nowadays that is more thrill for me than the hunt, and here is what I have to report.

It is spawning season for the sunnies. The males have made perfect basin-like clearings in the shallows. He cleans a space on the bottom,

fanning gravel away with his tail and even carrying off the larger stones in his mouth. When the time is right a female arrives at the nest and they swim close together. She is putting out a cloud of eggs and he discharges sperm. Then she goes away, leaving him to guard the eggs. They sink and become attached to the small stones and gravel in the nest. He is no longer sweeping with his big strong tail, just fanning more gently with his pectoral fins, keeping everything perfect for the hatching of the tiny transparent fish fry.

These remarkable creatures came to earth about 250 million years ago, and here they still are, fanning gravel in the lake right here in Monterey.

— Bonner McAllester